THE BASICS OF THE GREENHOUSE EFFECT: The Role of Greenhouse Gases and Aerosols

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Introduction:

Although there have been no major changes in our understanding of the sources and sinks of greenhouse gases and aerosols during the last two years, i.e., since the 1990 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Scientific Assessment, there have been a number of important advances. These advances include an improved quantitative understanding of the atmospheric distributions, trends, sources and sinks of greenhouse gases, their precursors and aerosols, and an improved understanding of the processes controlling their global budgets. In addition, there have been significant advances in our understanding of the impact of ozone depletion and sulphate aerosols on radiative forcing and of the limitations of the concept of the Global Warming Potential (GWP). The contents of this paper are taken from the 1992 IPCC Scientific Assessment.

The role of greenhouse gases and aerosols in changing the Earth's climate:

Increases in the concentration of the greenhouse gases reduce the efficiency with which the Earth cools to space and tend to warm the lower atmosphere and surface. The amount of warming depends on the size of the increase in concentration of each greenhouse gas, the radiative properties of the gases involved, and the concentration of other greenhouse gases already present in the atmosphere. It also can depend on local effects such as the variation with height of the concentration of the greenhouse gas, a consideration that may be particularly germane to water vapour which is not uniformly mixed throughout the atmosphere.

Aerosols (small particles) from volcanoes, natural and industrial emissions of sulfur containing gases, and biomass burning can absorb and reflect radiation. Moreover, changes in aerosol concentrations can alter cloud reflectivity through their effect on cloud properties. In most cases increases in the atmospheric abundance of aerosols tend to cool climate. In general, they have a much shorter lifetime than greenhouse gases so they are not uniformly distributed and their concentrations respond much more quickly to changes in emissions.

A necessary starting point for the prediction of changes in climate due to increases in greenhouse gases and aerosols is an estimate of their future concentrations. This requires a knowledge of both the strengths of their sources (natural and man-made) and also the mechanisms of their eventual removal from the atmosphere (their sinks). The projections of future concentrations can then be used in climate models to estimate the climatic response.

Recent Improvements in Scientific Understanding of the Sources and Sinks of Greenhouse Gases and Aerosols:

Atmospheric Concentrations and Trends of Long-lived Greenhouse Gases:

The atmospheric concentrations of the major long-lived greenhouse gases, carbon dioxide (CO_2), methane (CH_4), nitrous oxide (N_2O), chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), and carbon tetrachloride (CCl_4), continue to increase because of human activities. While the growth rates of most of these gases have been steady or increasing over the past decade, that of CH_4 and some of the halocarbons has been decreasing. The rate for CH_4 has declined from about 20 ppbv/yr in the late 1970s to possibly as low

as 10 ppbv/yr in 1989. While a number of hypotheses have been forwarded to explain these observations, none is completely satisfactory.

Sources and Sinks of Carbon Dioxide:

The two primary sources of the observed increase in atmospheric CO_2 are combustion of fossil fuels and land-use changes; cement production is a further important source.

The emission of CO_2 from the combustion of fossil fuels grew between 1987 and 1989. Preliminary data for 1990 indicate similar emissions to 1989. The best estimate for global fossil fuel emissions in 1989 and 1990 is 6.0±0.5 GtC (1 GtC (gigatonne of carbon) equals one billion [one thousand million (10^9)] tonnes of carbon), compared to 5.7±0.5 GtC in 1987 (IPCC, 1990). The estimated total release of carbon in the form of CO_2 from oil well fires in Kuwait during 1991 was 0.065 GtC, about one percent of total annual anthropogenic emissions.

The direct net flux of CO_2 from land use changes (primarily deforestation), integrated over time, depends upon the area of land deforested, the rate of reforestation and afforestation, the carbon density of the original and replacement forests, and the fate of above-ground and soil carbon. These and other factors are needed to estimate annual net emissions but significant uncertainties exist in our quantitative knowledge of them. Since IPCC (1990) some progress has been made in reducing the uncertainties associated with the rate of deforestation, at least in Brazil. A comprehensive, multi-year, high spatial resolution satellite data set has been used to to estimate that the average rate of deforestation in the Brazilian Amazonian forest between 1978 and 1989 was 2.1 million hectares (Mha) per year. The rate increased between 1978 and the mid-1980s, and has decreased to 1.4 Mha/yr in 1990. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), using information supplied by individual countries, recently estimated that the rate of global tropical deforestation in closed and open canopy forests for the period 1981-1990 was about 17 Mha/yr, approximately 50% higher than in the period 1976-1980.

Despite the new information regarding rates of deforestation, the uncertainties in estimating CO_2 emissions are so large that there is no strong reason to revise the IPCC 1990 estimate of annual average net flux to the atmosphere of 1.6±1.0 GtC from land-use change during the decade of the 1980s.

Since IPCC (1990) particular attention has focussed on understanding the processes controlling the release and uptake of CO_2 from both the terrestrial biosphere and the oceans, and on the quantification of the fluxes. Based on models and the atmospheric distribution of CO_2, it appears that there is a small net addition of carbon to the atmosphere from the equatorial region, a combination of outgassing of CO_2 from warm tropical waters and a terrestrial biospheric component that is the residual between large sources (including deforestation) and sinks. There appears to be a strong Northern Hemisphere sink, containing both oceanic and terrestrial biospheric components, and a weak Southern Hemisphere (SH) sink. The previous IPCC global estimate for an ocean sink of 2.0±0.8 GtC per year is still a reasonable one. The terrestrial biospheric processes which are suggested as contributing to the sinks are sequestration due to forest regeneration, and fertilization arising from the effects of both CO_2 and nitrogen (N), but none of these can be adequately quantified. This implies that the imbalance (of order 1-2 GtC/yr) between sources and sinks, i.e., "the missing sink", has not yet been resolved. This fact has significant consequences for estimates of future atmospheric CO_2 concentrations and the analysis of the concept of the Greenhouse Warming Potential.

Sources and Sinks of Methane:

A total (anthropogenic plus natural) annual emission of CH_4 of about 500Tg can be deduced from the magnitude of its sinks combined with its rate of accumulation in the atmosphere. While the sum of the individual sources is consistent with a total of 500Tg CH_4, there are still many uncertainties in accurately quantifying the magnitude of emissions from individual sources. Significant new information includes a revised rate of removal of CH_4 by atmospheric hydroxyl (OH) radicals (because of a lower rate constant), a new evaluation of some of the sources (e.g., from rice fields) and the addition of new sources (e.g., animal and domestic waste). Recent CH_4 isotopic studies suggest that approximately 100Tg CH_4 (20% of the total CH_4 source) is of fossil origin, largely from the coal, oil, and natural gas industries. Recent studies of CH_4 emissions from rice agriculture, in particular Japan, India, Australia, Thailand and China, show that the emissions depend on growing conditions, particularly soil characteristics, and vary significantly. While the overall uncertainty in the magnitude of global emissions from rice agriculture remains large, a detailed analysis now suggests significantly lower annual emissions than reported in IPCC 1990. The latest estimate of the atmospheric lifetime of CH_4 is about 11 years.

Sources and Sinks of Nitrous Oxide:

Adipic acid (nylon) production, nitric acid production and automobiles with three-way catalysts have been identified as possibly significant anthropogenic global sources of nitrous oxide. However, the sum of all known anthropogenic and natural sources is still barely sufficient to balance the calculated atmospheric sink (stratospheric photolysis) or to explain the observed increase in the atmospheric abundance of N_2O.

Sources of Halogenated Species:

The worldwide consumption of CFCs 11, 12, and 113 is now 40% below 1986 levels, substantially below the amounts permitted under the Montreal Protocol. Further reductions are mandated by the 1990 London Amendments to the Montreal Protocol. As CFCs are phased out, HCFCs and HFCs will substitute, but at lower emission rates.

Atmospheric Concentrations and Trends of Other Gases that Influence the Radiative Budget:

Ozone (O_3) is an effective greenhouse gas both in the stratosphere and in the troposphere. Significant decreases have been observed during the last one to two decades in total column O_3 at all latitudes - except the tropics - in spring, summer and winter. The downward trends were larger during the 1980s than in the 1970s. These decreases have occurred predominantly in the lower stratosphere (below 25km), where the rate of decrease has been up to 10% per decade depending on altitude. In addition, there is evidence to indicate that O_3 levels in the troposphere up to 10km altitude above the few existing ozonesonde stations at northern middle latitudes have increased by about 10% per decade over the past two decades. Also, the abundance of carbon monoxide (CO) appears to be increasing in the NH at about 1% per year. However, there is little new information on the global trends of other tropospheric O_3 precursors, (non-methane hydrocarbons (NMHC) and oxides of nitrogen (NO_x)).

Stratospheric Ozone Depletion:

Even if the control measures of the 1990 London amendments to the Montreal Protocol were to be implemented by all nations, the abundance of stratospheric chlorine and bromine will increase over the next several years. The Antarctic ozone hole, caused by industrial halocarbons, will therefore recur

each spring. In addition, as the weight of evidence suggests that these gases are also responsible for the observed reductions in middle- and high latitude stratospheric O_3, the depletion at these latitudes is predicted to continue unabated through the 1990s.

Sources of Precursors of Tropospheric Ozone:

Little new information is available regarding the tropospheric ozone precursors (CO, NMHC, and NO_X), all of which have significant natural and anthropogenic sources. Their detailed budgets therefore remain uncertain.

Source of Aerosols:

Industrial activity, biomass burning, volcanic eruptions, and sub-sonic aircraft contribute substantially to the formation of tropospheric and stratospheric aerosols. Industrial activities are concentrated in the Northern Hemisphere where their impact on tropospheric sulphate aerosols is greatest. Sulphur emissions, which are due in large part to combustion effluents, have a similar emissions history to that of anthropogenic CO_2. Estimates of emissions of natural sulphur compounds have been reduced from previous figures, thereby placing more emphasis on the anthropogenic contribution.

Scenarios of Future Emissions of Greenhouse Gases, Greenhouse Gas Precursors, and Aerosol Precursors

Scenarios of net greenhouse gas and aerosol precursor emissions for the next 100 years or more are necessary to support study of potential anthropogenic impacts on the climate system. The scenarios provide inputs to climate models and assist in the examination of the relative importance of relevant trace gases and aerosol precursors in changing atmospheric composition and climate. Scenarios can also help in improving the understanding of key relationships among factors that drive future emissions.

Scenario outputs are not predictions of the future, and should not be used as such; they illustrate the effect of a wide range of economic, demographic and policy assumptions. They are inherently controversial because they reflect different views of the future. The results of scenarios can vary considerably from actual outcomes even over short time horizons. Confidence in scenario outputs decreases as the time horizon increases, because the basis for the underlying assumptions becomes increasingly speculative. Considerable uncertainties surround the evolution of the types and levels of human activities (including economic growth and structure), technological advances, and human responses to possible environmental, economic and institutional constraints. Consequently, emission scenarios must be constructed carefully and used with great caution.

Since completion of the 1990 IPCC Scenario A (SA90) events and new information have emerged which relate to that scenario's underlying assumptions. These developments include: the London Amendments to the Montreal Protocol; revision of population forecasts by the World Bank and United Nations; publication of the IPCC Energy and Industry Sub-group scenario of greenhouse gas emissions to 2025; political events and economic changes in the former USSR, Eastern Europe and the Middle East; re-estimation of sources and sinks of greenhouse gases (reviewed in this Assessment); revision of preliminary FAO data on tropical deforestation; and new scientific studies on forest biomass. There has also been recognition of considerable uncertainty regarding other important factors that drive future emissions.

These factors have led to an update of the SA90. Six alternative IPCC Scenarios (IS92 a-f) now embody a wide array of assumptions (population growth, economic growth, role of nuclear power, renewable energy costs), that affect how future greenhouse gas emissions might evolve in the absence

of climate policies beyond those already adopted. This constitutes a significant improvement over the previous methodology. However, the probability of any of the resulting emission paths has not been analyzed. IPCC WGI does not prefer any individual scenario. Other combinations of assumptions could illustrate a broader variety of emission trajectories. The different worlds which the new scenarios imply, in terms of economic, social and environmental conditions, vary widely. The current exercise provides an interim view and lays a basis for a more complete study of future emissions of greenhouse gas and aerosol precursors.

Scenario Results:

The range of possible annual emissions of greenhouse gases is very wide as shown by the selected results of six IPCC Greenhouse gas scenarios below:

Scenario	Year	CO_2 (GtC)	CH_4 (Tg)	N_2O (TgN)	CFCs (kt)	SO_x (TgS)
IS92a	1990	7.4	506	12.9	827	98
	2025	12.2	659	15.8	217	141
	2100	20.3	917	17.0	3	169
IS92b	2025	11.8	659	15.7	36	140
	2100	19.1	917	16.9	0	164
IS92c	2025	8.8	589	15.0	217	115
	2100	4.6	546	13.7	3	77
IS92d	2025	9.3	584	15.1	24	104
	2100	10.3	567	14.5	0	87
IS92e	2025	15.1	692	16.3	24	163
	2100	35.8	1072	19.1	0	254
IS92e	2025	14.4	697	16.2	217	151
	2100	26.6	1168	19.0	3	204

All six scenarios can be compared to SA90. IS92a is slightly lower than SA90 due to modest and largely offsetting changes in the underlying assumptions. (For example, compared to SA90, higher population forecasts increase the emission estimates, while phaseout of halocarbons and more optimistic renewable energy costs reduce them.) The highest greenhouse gas levels result from the new scenario IS92e which combines, among other assumptions, moderate population growth, high economic growth, high fossil fuel availability and eventual hypothetical phaseout of nuclear power. The lowest greenhouse gas levels result from IS92c which assumes that population grows, then declines by the middle of the next century, that economic growth is low and that there are severe constraints on fossil fuel supplies. Overall, the scenarios indicate that greenhouse gas emissions could rise substantially over the coming century in the absence of new measures explicitly intended to reduce their emission. However, IS92c has a CO_2 emission path which eventually falls below its starting 1990 level. IS92b, a modification of IS92a, suggests that current commitments by many OECD Member countries to stabilize or reduce CO_2 might have a small impact on greenhouse gas emissions over the next few decades, but would not offset substantial growth in possible emissions in the long run. IS92b does not take into account that such commitments could accelerate development and diffusion of low greenhouse gas technologies, nor possible resulting shifts in industrial mix.

Carbon Dioxide:

The new emissions scenarios for CO_2 from the energy sector span a broad range of futures Population and economic growth, structural changes in economies, energy prices, technological advance, fossil fuel supplies, nuclear and renewable energy availability are among the factors which could exert major influence on future levels of CO_2 emissions. Developments such as those in the republics of the former Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe, now incorporated into all the scenarios, have important implications for future fossil fuel carbon emissions, by affecting the levels of economic activities and the efficiency of energy production and use. Biotic carbon emissions in the early decades of the scenarios are higher than SA90, reflecting higher preliminary FAO estimates of current rates of deforestation in many - though not all - parts of the world, and higher estimates of forest biomass.

Halocarbons:

The revised scenarios for CFCs and other substances which deplete stratospheric ozone are much lower than in SA90. This is consistent with wide participation in the controls under the 1990 London Amendments to the Montreal Protocol. However, the future production and composition of CFC substitutes (HCFCs and HFCs) could significantly affect the levels of radiative forcing from these compounds.

Methane, Nitrous Oxide, Ozone Precursors and Sulphur Gases:

The distribution of CH_4 and N_2O emissions from the different sources has changed from the SA90 case. Methane from rice paddies are lower, and emissions from animal waste and domestic sewage have been added. N_2O emission factors for stationary sources and biomass burning have been revised downwards. Adipic and nitric acid have been included as additional sources of N_2O. Preliminary analysis of the emissions of volatile organic compounds and sulphur dioxide suggests that the global emissions of these substances are likely to grow in the coming century if no new limitation strategies are implemented.

Relationship Between Emissions and Atmospheric Concentrations and the Influence on the Radiative Budget

A key issue is to relate emissions of greenhouse gases, greenhouse gas precursors and aerosol precursors to future concentrations of greenhouse gases and aerosols in order to assess their impact on the radiative balance. A number of different types of model have been developed.

Carbon Cycle Models:

While there is a variety of carbon cycle models (including 3-D ocean-atmosphere models, 1-D ocean-atmosphere box-diffusion models, and box models that incorporate a terrestrial biospheric sink) all such models are subject to considerable uncertainty because of an inadequate understanding of the processes controlling the uptake and release of CO_2 from the oceans and terrestrial ecosystems. Some models assume a net neutral terrestrial biosphere, balancing fossil fuel emissions of CO_2 by oceanic uptake and atmospheric accumulation, others achieve balance by invoking additional assumptions regarding the effect of CO_2 fertilization on the different parts of the biosphere. However even models that balance the past and contemporary carbon cycle may not predict future atmospheric concentrations accurately because they do not necessarily represent the proper mix of processes on land and in the oceans. The differences in predicted changes in CO_2 concentrations are up to 30%. This does not represent the major uncertainty in the prediction of future climate change compared with uncertainties in estimating future patterns of trace gas emissions, and in quantifying climate feedback processes. A

simple empirical estimate can be based on the assumption that the fraction of emissions which remains in the atmosphere is the same as that observed over the last decade; i.e., 46±7%.

Atmospheric Gas Phase Chemistry Models:

Current tropospheric models exhibit substantial differences in their predictions of changes in O_3, in the hydroxyl radical (OH) and in other chemically active gases due to emissions of CH_4, non-methane hydrocarbons, CO and, in particular, NO_x. These arise from uncertainties in the knowledge of background chemical composition and our inability to represent small-scale processes occurring within the atmosphere. These deficiencies limit the accuracy of predicted changes in the abundance and distribution of tropospheric O_3, and in the lifetimes of a number of other greenhouse gases, including the HCFCs and HFCs, all of which depend upon the abundance of the OH radical. Increases in CH_4, NMHCs, and CO all lead to increases in O_3, and decreases in OH, thus leading to an increase in radiative forcing. On the other hand because increases in NO_x lead to an increase in both O_3 and OH, the net effect on radiative forcing is uncertain.

Atmospheric Sulphate Aerosol Models:

The atmospheric chemistry of sulphate aerosols and their precursors has been extensively studied in relation to the acid rain issue. While our understanding of processes related to chemical transformations has increased significantly in recent years, substantial uncertainties remain, especially regarding the microphysics of aerosol formation, interaction of aerosols with clouds, and the removal of aerosol particles by precipitation.

How has our Understanding of Changes in Radiative Forcing Changed?

Since IPCC (1990), there have been significant advances in our understanding of the impact of ozone depletion and sulphate aerosols on radiative forcing and of the limitations of the concept of the Global Warming Potential.

Radiative Forcing due to Changes in Stratospheric Ozone:

For the first time observed global depletions of O_3 in the lower stratosphere have been used to calculate changes in the radiative balance of the atmosphere. Although the results are sensitive to atmospheric adjustments, and no GCM studies of the implications of the O_3 changes on surface temperature have been performed, the radiative balance calculations indicate that the O_3 reductions observed during the 1980s have caused reductions in the radiative forcing of the surface-troposphere system at mid- and high- latitudes. This reduction in radiative forcing resulting from O_3 depletion could, averaged on a global scale and over the last decade, be approximately equal in magnitude and opposite in sign to the enhanced radiative forcing due to increased CFCs during the same time period. The effect at high latitudes is particularly pronounced and, because of these large variations with latitude and region, studies using GCMs are urgently required to further test these findings.

Radiative Forcing due to Changes in Tropospheric Ozone:

While there are consistent observations of an increase in tropospheric ozone (up to 10% per decade) at a limited number of locations in Europe, there is not an adequate global set of observations to quantify the magnitude of the increase in radiative forcing. However, it has been calculated that a 10% uniform global increase in tropospheric ozone would increase radiative forcing by about a tenth of a watt per square metre.

Radiative Effects of Sulphur Emissions:

Emissions of sulphur compounds from anthropogenic sources lead to the presence of sulphate aerosols which reflect solar radiation. This is likely to have a cooling influence on the Northern Hemisphere (there is negligible effect in the Southern Hemisphere). For clear-sky conditions alone, the cooling caused by current rates of emissions has been estimated to be about $1Wm^{-2}$ averaged over the Northern Hemisphere, a value which should be compared with the estimate of $2.5Wm^{-2}$ for the heating due to anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions up to the present. The non-uniform distribution of anthropogenic sulphate aerosols coupled with their relatively short atmospheric residence time produce large regional variations in their effects. In addition, sulphate aerosols may affect the radiation budget through changes in cloud optical properties.

Global Warming Potentials:

Gases can exert a radiative forcing both directly and indirectly: direct forcing occurs when the gas itself is a greenhouse gas; indirect forcing occurs when chemical transformation of the original gas produces a gas or gases which themselves are greenhouse gases. The concept of the Global Warming Potential (GWP) has been developed for policymakers as a measure of the possible warming effect on the surface-troposphere system arising from the emission of each gas relative to CO_2. The indices are calculated for the contemporary atmosphere and do not take into account possible changes in chemical composition of the atmosphere. Changes in radiative forcing due to CO_2, on a kg basis, are non-linear with changes in the atmospheric CO_2 concentrations. Hence, as CO_2 levels increase from present values, the GWPs of the non-CO_2 gases would be higher than those evaluated here. For the concept to be most useful, both the direct and indirect components of the GWP need to be quantified.

Direct Global Warming Potentials:

The direct components of the Global Warming Potentials (GWPs) have been recalculated, taking into account revised estimated lifetimes, for a set of time horizons ranging from 20 to 500 years, with CO_2 as the reference gas. The same ocean-atmosphere carbon cycle model as in IPCC (1990) has been used to relate CO_2 emission to concentrations. Table 3 shows values for a selected set of key gases for the 100 year time horizon. While in most cases the values are similar to the previous IPCC (1990) values, the GWPs for some of the HCFCs and HFCs have increased by 20 to 50% because of revised estimates of their lifetimes. The direct GWP of CH_4 has been adjusted upward, correcting an error in the previous IPCC report. The carbon cycle model used in these calculations probably underestimates both the direct and indirect GWP values for all non-CO_2 gases. The magnitude of the bias depends on the atmospheric lifetime of the gas, and the GWP time horizon.

Indirect Global Warming Potentials:

Because of our incomplete understanding of chemical processes, most of the indirect GWPs reported in IPCC (1990) are likely to be in substantial error, and none of them can be recommended. Although we are not yet in a position to recommend revised numerical values, we know, however, that the indirect GWP for methane is positive and could be comparable in magnitude to its direct value. In contrast, based on the sub-section above, the indirect GWPs for chlorine and bromine halocarbons are likely to be negative. The concept of a GWP for short-lived, inhomogeneously distributed constituents, such as CO, NMHC, and NO_x may prove inapplicable, although, as noted above, we know that these constituents will affect the radiative balance of the atmosphere through changes in tropospheric ozone and OH. Similarly, a GWP for SO_2 is viewed to be inapplicable because of the non-uniform distribution of sulphate aerosols.